

Kevin Featherly, *Politics in Minnesota*

At least one east metro mayor is feeling "giddy" that his city is among the beneficiaries of a \$1.2 million federal grant aimed at studying transit alternatives between the Union Depot in downtown St. Paul and the city of Rosemount along Robert Street.

Officials are years away from figuring out which mode of mass transit would be best to link St. Paul with West St. Paul, South St. Paul, Mendota Heights, Inver Grove Heights and Rosemount via Robert Street, known also as U.S. 52. The grant will pay for a study of feasibility and ridership levels of various modes, including light rail and bus rapid transit.

"I'm just giddy about this," says West St. Paul Mayor John Zannmiller, "because two times in a row, Governor [Tim] Pawlenty line-itemed the money that we need to do this out of the bonding bill."

The Robert Street Transit Corridor will receive a \$1.18 million federal grant from the Federal Transit Administration, which is part of the U.S. Department of Transportation. The grant, announced on Dec. 17, will go to the Dakota County Railroad Authority to support the evaluation of transit alternatives.

According to the FTA, it decided to grant money for the study because "access to employment concentrations and mobility for the area's growing senior citizen population are the primary motivators for a transit investment."

Zannmiller is among leaders in several municipalities along Robert Street that have been mulling over transit options for years.

"We've got to have a feasible plan," he says. "I am not for putting in a mode of transportation that is not going to have the ridership and the support. But there is this bottleneck that is coming into the core city."

Zannmiller says that while he's not committed to any particular mode, the one idea he'd vigorously oppose is widening the street - there's simply no room to do that.

On the other hand, if nothing is done his city might strangle on traffic jams that discourage people from shopping, eating and playing in West St. Paul, Zannmiller says. His goal is to get more people into his city, a goal that he thinks is not attainable without improved traffic flow.

"If we want to keep the economic vitality of Robert Street going," he says, "we really need to look at effective mass transit to the next generation."

An estimated 129,000 vehicles cross the Mississippi River at the Lafayette and Robert Street bridges each weekday, according to figures released by the office of U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum.

Over the next two decades, the population in that corridor is expected to grow by 30 percent and employment increase by approximately 40 percent, according to the figures from McCollum's office.

